

Janice Galloway's *Clara* and the Broadening of Scottish Literary Horizons

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Introduction

When Beveridge and Turnbull coined the term “cultural cringe” in 1989, describing the phenomenon whereby many Scots had come to believe that they were somehow lesser than their bigger neighbour to the south, they were referring mainly to the political sphere. However they could easily have been discussing the wider experience of being Scottish. It's somewhat surprising that it took so long for the situation to be described and labelled, particularly since, in the literary world, the fight back had long been underway.

This paper will begin with a concise summary of the major trends in twentieth century Scottish literature. I will then move on to look in detail at *Clara* (2002) by Janice Galloway and what this historical novel symbolised for Scottish literature in the twenty-first century.

Historical Overview

While Scottish literature has a heritage that goes back over a millennium, in order to avoid an endless regression I'll limit my focus to the twentieth century.

The Scottish Renaissance is the name given to a loose grouping of writers who centred their literary output on Scottish themes and locations. These writers included people like Neil Gunn, Lewis Grassie Gibbon, Nan Shepherd and Naomi Mitchison. Their work laid the foundations for later generations of Scottish writers by using Scotland as a location for great works of literature in the way that England had long taken for granted. Books like Gunn's *The Silver Darlings* (1941) used the backdrop of Scottish history for their fiction, while *A Scot's Quair* (1932–1934) by Gibbon explored traditional rural life, a topic common in world literatures, famously so in Russia, but hitherto ignored in the Scottish context. Although works of the Scottish Renaissance were produced predominantly in English, texts in Scots and Gaelic were also being produced and published at the same time by writers such as Sorley Maclean and Iain Crichton Smith.

In the context of the argument I am putting forward, these writers laid the path, and showed a way forward. Subsequent generations followed behind.

Next came the baby-boom generation, most famously exemplified by the so-called Glasgow

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School. Represented in prose by writers such as Alasdair Gray, James Kelman, and in poetry by Liz Lochhead and Tom Leonard. In comparison with the Scottish Renaissance, this generation was more modern, more urban, more immediate in their concerns, focusing on the urban working class (see *The Busconductor Hines*, 1984) or the psychogeography of the Glaswegian streets (*Lanark*, 1981). They were also much more concerned with the matter of language, staking a militant claim to Scots as a poetic language as rich and valuable as English (for example Leonard's "Feed ma Lamz" (1980)).

The language of conflict is apt here, since at times it felt as if Scots had to fight for every millimetre of ground, and the enemy was just as much the cultural cringe as it was an Anglo-centric publish industry. The furore over Kelman's Booker Prize win for *How Late it Was, How Late* (1994), in which one judge distanced herself from the decision (Winder, 1994) and critics including Kingsley Amis (2011) bemoaned the language in which it was written, was merely the most visible battle in a bitter war of attrition.

Whatever the critical reactions, a younger generation of readers was taking notice. As with all conflicts, the spoils are for future generations to enjoy. In her introduction to the 20th anniversary edition of *Lanark: A Life in Four Books*, Janice Galloway (2002) recalled the impact of that novel and everything it came to represent for Scottish writers who followed in its wake.

Gray spoke using the words, syntax and places of home, yet he did it without the tang of apology ... Scotland, my schooling had at times implied, at times openly professed, was a small, cold, bitter place that had no political clout, not much cultural heritage, joyless people and writers who were all male and all dead. As modern Scots, we were unfit to offer Art, politics or philosophy to the world, we were fit only for losing at football games. Not so, this book said: on a number of levels, not so. (Galloway, 2002b, pp. xii-xiii)

As far as young Scottish writers were concerned, the war was over. Scotland had been shown to be a legitimate setting for literature, to be full of legitimate themes for literature, and packed with legitimate characters for literature. Even its diverse languages and dialects had been shown to be legitimate tools for literature. What someone has done once, others can repeat, as Alan Bissett (2019) described after reading Irvine Welsh's *Trainspotting* (1993):

After a few pages I was like: "Wait a minute! That's how I speak!" I had no idea this was even allowed, I thought you had to write in standard English. The idea that you could write about schemes from Edinburgh, in the voice people talk in, radically shifted the mental path I had been on. Up until then I was writing genre stuff, fantasy and horror. But after *Trainspotting*, this was what I was going to do. If he can write about the world he comes from in the language that's his, I thought, I'm going to write about the world I come from, in a language that's mine (Bissett, 2019, para 5).

Less than a decade after *Lanark* (1981), Galloway published the hugely influential *The Trick is*

To Keep Breathing (1989). Her peers, Irvine Welsh, Ali Smith, and A. L. Kennedy, each in their own way, broke new ground (Kincaid, 2017). Welsh describes it as a reaction against the previous generation:

To an extent you're always reacting against what's gone before, trying to establish your own identity. With Kelman and Alasdair Gray, you see how they were reacting against that Kailyard tradition. With *Rebel Inc*, we were reacting against them. In their fiction, they had those seventies ideas that there was still a socialist aspirational element to society, a radical working class. We were looking at how people had adapted to the new order (Johnstone, 2022).

The gates had been forced; the walls were tumbling. So many others followed: Alan Bissett, Anne Donovan, Duncan McLean, Zoe Strachan, and Louise Welsh to name but a few. A trickle became a flood; Scottish literature was in business. The debate was over, the point made, the battle won. By the end of the twentieth century Kelman had won the Booker and the *Trainspotting* (1996) movie was a global phenomenon. Recriminations sputtered on amongst London booksellers and cultural cringers who, like Monty Python's Black Knight, refused to admit defeat. Think-pieces were written bemoaning the state of the "modern Scottish literary identity" ("Scots writers", 1997) but Scotland's authors and poets simply ignored them and were already disappearing over the horizon.

Extremes

Along the way, something unexpected happened. The pendulum swung from one extreme to the other. Scotland had gone from being unthinkable as a literary setting to the only literary setting for Scottish writers. Cultural cringe was replaced with zealotry, breeding a kind of elitist parochialism. It was not often seen in any of the writers, or certainly none of any importance, but critics and journalists, in the main, began to express definite opinions about what Scottish literature should be and more critically, what it *should not be*.

In part this was driven by sales. When a publisher finds success in one area, they tend to mine that area until it is dry. What sold, generally, was fiction set in the Central Belt, and more often than not white, straight, and working class. Scottish Literature was being defined and ill-defined. People got riled and the debate rumbled on. For instance, while Alan Warner complained that working-class fiction was marginalised (Rustin, 2011), Iain Banks was castigated for populating his books with rich people who didn't have to work. *The Crow Road* was described as "unapologetically middle-class" (Flying High, 1996, para. 14) as if one should be expected to apologise for writing from a middle-class perspective. I was personally told that I was writing the 'wrong kind of Scottish literature' for dabbling with magical realism and middle-class characters. Clearly, this was all nonsense.

As the years rolled on the rest of Scotland pushed for their slice of the spotlight. The focus moved away from the central belt to Orcadian writers, Hebridean writers, Highland writers,

Aberdonian writers, all writing about Orkney, the Hebrides, the Highlands and Aberdeen. Scottish literature moved into new areas and other frontiers fell: more women than ever were published, LGBTQ+ writers became better represented, genre fiction grew in prominence, particularly the now-ubiquitous Tartan Noir. Scottish literature staked its claim to all manner of territory and all concerned should be rightly proud of its victories. But something is always forgotten.

What was forgotten was the rest of the world. Scotland, which for better or worse had always been an outward looking nation, had turned inwards. The Scottish Renaissance and the Glasgow School showed Scots they could write about Scotland and so everyone did at the expense of all else. We became inward looking, and every review compared us to ourselves. Each author was the new Kelman, the new Welsh, the next Lochhead, the next Galloway. Every corner of Scotland had a light shone on it, every town had its own grumpy detective struggling with alcohol but determined to take down the bad guys at all costs. We got so caught up in learning how to write about Scotland, we forgot we could write about other things as well. We forgot the lesson of one of our greatest forebears: Robert Louis Stevenson gave us *Kidnapped* (1886) that great epic of the High and Lowlands, but he also gave us *The Bottle Imp* (1891) and *South Sea Tales* (1891).

In an interview with Alasdair Braidwood for the *Scot's Whay Hae* podcast (Braidwood, 2015), Andrew Raymond Drennan raised the issue.

I was awful tired... any review I got was always 'Scottish writer Andrew Raymond Drennan' [or] 'A Scottish book by a Scottish writer.' I don't know when it happened that Scottish writers weren't supposed to branch out and do something a little bit bigger... you know, no one really questioned when Phillip Roth set a book in the Czech Republic and I felt really alienated from the whole scene... it was total naval-gazing and there was no sense of ambition.

Janice Galloway and *Clara*

As always with these sweeping historic trends, things were changing but the pattern only emerged after the fact. In retrospect, perhaps it's fitting that the biggest shift came from Janice Galloway, an author so intimately related to shaping and describing what became the hot core of Scottish literature.

The Trick is to Keep Breathing (1989) defines a certain kind of Scottish literature to this day, particularly writing about mental health. She followed up with *Blood* (1991) and *Where you Find It* (1996), two short story collections seeped in Galloway's acerbic analysis of Scottish social relationships. Sandwiched in between these collections came *Foreign Parts* (1994), the story of two Scottish women holidaying in France. Galloway was a writer for Scotland, a writer of Scotland, someone who had taken the inspiration of that encounter with *Lanark* (1981) and ran with it, helping define what Scottish literature could be for the generation who came after.

In 2002 she returned with one of the sharpest left-turns in the history of Scottish literature. From fiction rooted in the nitty-gritty of contemporary Scottish life, she changed tack and wrote about Clara Schumann, the acclaimed concert pianist and composer, born in Leipzig in 1819. This was

historical fiction, but not like Walter Scott did it. This was set abroad, but not like *Foreign Parts*, (1994) Alan Warner's *Morvern Callar* (1995), or Kelman's *Dirt Road* (2016) where we travel abroad in the company of Scots. There wasn't a mite of Scotland anywhere. Schumann never visited Scotland. She didn't have a Scottish friend or a Scottish housekeeper. She knew Felix Mendelssohn who visited Edinburgh and composed two works inspired by his trip ("Why was Mendelssohn", 2020), but Galloway never mentions this. Scotland is conspicuous in its absence.

Clara

The book itself is wonderful, a lesson in how to blend fiction and non-fiction, how to write sympathetically yet critically about the lives of real subjects, and a moving study of the expectations and limits placed upon the ambitions of women. The spark for writing the novel came from hearing Clara Schumann née Wieck referred to as "that dreadful bitch Robert Schumann was married to" (Richards, 2002), a misunderstood or neglected subject being catnip to a curious novelist.

Clara Wieck's talent for music at an early age led to her father forcing her into performing across Europe. It's a classic story of an overbearing parent living their dreams vicariously through a child without agency. She escapes her father's orbit for that of Robert Schumann, who once studied with Friedrich Wieck. An initial honeymoon turns sour when Schumann's mental health deteriorates and he is eventually put into an asylum, leaving her with eight children and a household to run on little income.

In many ways *Clara* is no different from much of the rest of Galloway's oeuvre, centring largely on the internal world of a complicated woman, making it, in a sense, a natural progression from *The Trick is to Keep Breathing* (1989) and *Foreign Parts* (1994). Her experience of writing about mental illness shows in the lyrical and experimental passages showing Robert's collapse while marginalised, oppressed women is one of Galloway's most frequent recurring themes. So, in many ways the subject matter is from the Galloway playbook, but in others this is a complete departure.

To me it's almost freak, what I end up writing about... where it comes from is your own personal psychology. The stuff that's happened to you. The piece of land you stand on — geography — has something to do with it (Richards, 2002).

It is intriguing that in this interview conducted during the promotional push after the launch of *Clara*, Galloway should directly refer to the land, the geography, and how it influences the author, since this was the book in which she chose to step away from Scottish settings and Scottish themes. As Galloway has, to my knowledge, never directly addressed this subject we can only speculate on the cause: a natural movement away from the centre as the career progresses or perhaps, to echo Drennan (2015), creative ambition. Whatever the reason, Galloway quickly returned to Scotland after *Clara* (2002), writing two highly localised "anti-memoirs" (Bowden, 2012), *This is Not About Me* (2008) and *All Made Up* (2012) and, to date, never writing another novel.

While *Clara* (2002) won the Saltire Scottish Book of the Year award, it is still *The Trick is to*

Keep Breathing for which she is best known. *Clara*'s lasting legacy however may well be the subtle influence it had on the direction of Scottish literature: that while Scots have the right to write about Scotland, to write about our lives, be that taking heroin in Edinburgh, driving around Falkirk with your mates, or delving into family history in the Highlands, we also have the right to *not* write about Scotland.

After Clara

Clara (2002) was not the first Scottish book set entirely outside Scotland, disconnected from Scottish-centric themes, and wasn't even the first for her generation. Iain Banks's *Canal Dreams* (1989) for example, was published the same year as *The Trick is to Keep Breathing* (1989), his seventh and her first. However that book was something of a flop and one that Banks later came to regard as a failure (Branscombe, 1995). *Clara* (2002) came at a time when the Scottish literary environment was beginning to shift and other writers were thinking of stretching their wings and looking over horizons. *Clara* (2002) was, in that regard, a pioneer, a leader of the pack, one of the first stones in what became a landslide. *Clara* (2002) is symbolic of a shift in 21st century Scottish literature.

Three years later, in 2005, Inverness-born Ali Smith published *The Accidental* (2005) set entirely in England with English characters. After having one foot at home for the Scot-in-Japan *The Pure Land* (2004), Alan Spence finally cast off in *Night Boat* (2013). Irvine Welsh, the writer most heavily associated in some minds with a highly Scottish outlook, set *The Sex Lives of Siamese Twins* (2014) in Miami. Toni Davidson's *My Gun Was As Tall As Me* (2012) is set in Burma and its follow-up, *The Alpine Casanovas* (2015) is set in Switzerland among a Vietnamese refugee community. Andrew Raymond Drennan, quoted above, published *The Limits of the World* (2015) about North Korea in 2015. Jackie Copleton's *A Dictionary of Mutual Understanding* (2015) set in Nagasaki and the US came out the same year. In little more than a decade since the publication of *Clara* (2002), Scots were leaving Scotland behind. From this vantage point in 2024, the direction of travel is clear to see.

Of course, this is not to say that Scots turned their back on the lessons of their forebears. Scotland's second Booker Prize win came in 2020 with *Shuggie Bain* (2020), a novel set in the white working-class community of Glasgow. In his acceptance speech, author Douglas Stuart (2022) specifically mentioned James Kelman's *How Late it Was, How Late* (1994) and the influence it had on him to see his city and hear his language in a work of literature.

Surely, given this level of confidence, this kind of ambition, the cultural cringe has been dealt with, at least at home. Of course, it's still hard for Scottish writers to get noticed elsewhere, particularly by "literary London" (Bissett, 2009). Conservative booksellers maintain readers aren't interested in books from the geographical 'over there' while standing in front of displays of Scandinavian crime fiction. At the moment this is a risk averse business. In their 2015 *Literature and Publishing Sector Review*, Creative Scotland (2015) acknowledged the need for more to be done to promote Scottish literature outside our borders, but in the nine years since it's hard to see

what has been done. Nevertheless this should not be the first consideration of the writer. Books should not be written with one eye on what Waterstones Piccadilly is stocking.

Sadly, that is often the case. Scottish crime fiction — Tartan Noir — sells well and after the pandemic, many publishers are retrenching, narrowing their lists and focusing on what is guaranteed to sell, and Tartan Noir is a guarantee. Some Scottish writers are taking note and moving into an already crowded market. Helen Sedgwick, Philip Miller, and Maureen Myant, for example, have all moved into crime fiction from other genres.

There is much exciting development in the realms of science fiction and fantasy, which is hardly surprising: we can write about Scotland; we can *not* write about Scotland. So what's next? Other worlds, other Scotlands. The rise of dystopian fiction in Scotland was depressingly easy to predict given the climate crisis and the political situation in the UK and the wider world. It cannot be a coincidence that after the lost Independence referendum Scotland's writers saw a gloomy future. Jane Alexander, Rachelle Attala, Vicki Jarrett, Philip Miller, and Michael F. Russell, all published near-future Scottish dystopias, while Ian Green set his fantasy *Rotstorm* (2021–2023) series in a goblin-infested poisonous world loosely based on his Aberdeenshire home, complete with local references and in-jokes.

Conclusion

We are almost a century on from the publication of *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle* (1926) by Hugh MacDiarmid, that revolutionary classic long Scots poem that many credit with kickstarting this whole revival. A century on, the lesson Galloway took from Gray has been internalised, but so has the lesson Galloway taught herself and those who came after: write about Scotland or don't write about Scotland. Just write. The only boundary remaining is the limits of the imagination.

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